

Lithuania's Pedantic Revolutionary

By Michael Dobbs
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VILNIUS, U.S.S.R.—As the Kremlin tightened its economic squeeze on Lithuania last week, President Vytautas Landsbergis had a piano moved into his office. It stands at the opposite end of the room from the red, green and yellow flag of the independent Lithuanian state.

When Lithuania's new leader needs a respite from the war of nerves with Moscow, he settles

down at his piano and escapes into a world of mysticism and symbolism. Strains of music by Mikalojus Konstantinas Ciurlionis, a turn-of-the-century Lithuanian composer and painter, can be heard floating from the presidential office.

Music and politics have always been inseparably intertwined in the life of the man at the center of the most serious constitutional crisis in modern Soviet history. A 57-year-old musicologist who is still on the staff of Vilnius University, Landsbergis has devoted much of his ca-

reer to defending Lithuanian national culture from "Sovietization."

"You have to understand that, for many years, cultural activity meant political activity. By protecting our culture, we also protected our national identity. Otherwise, we would have been Russified—first in language and later in thinking," Landsbergis said in a recent interview.

In some ways, Landsbergis is an unlikely national leader. He is almost entirely lacking in charisma. His speeches are dry, even pedan-

See LANDSBERGIS, A16, Col. 1

Lithuania's Pedantic Landsbergis I

LANDSBERGIS, From A1

tic. He was never a prominent dissident. His lifelong obsession with Ciurlionis, a leader of the symbolist movement who was denounced as a "bourgeois decadent" by the Kremlin's cultural commissars, seems a strange training ground for a war of nerves with Mikhail Gorbachev.

What Landsbergis does have is a direct spiritual line to the renaissance of Lithuanian culture at the turn of the century after 100 years of domination by czarist Russia. He is a product of the inbred world of Catholic intellectuals who managed to keep the flame of national identity alive in the face of fierce pressures. The tenacity with which he pursues the goal of Lithuanian statehood is both his strength and his weakness.

In the weeks since the Lithuanian legislature declared its independence on March 11, Landsbergis has refused to bow to Kremlin pressure. Displays of Soviet military might, including a column of armored cars trundling past his window, have failed to intimidate him. The prospect of mass unemployment following the cutoff in Soviet energy supplies has not caused him to flinch.

"These everyday difficulties do not exist for him. He thinks you can do without such things as gasoline," said his wife, Grazyna. "He is guided by a single motivating idea: the freedom of Lithuania. He believes that a little country also has the right to its independence."

Landsbergis says he is willing to compromise with Gorbachev on some of the side issues related to independence, including the stationing of Soviet troops on Lithuanian territory. But he is adamant that he will not back down on the most important issue of all: the independence declaration itself.

"We cannot go back to the Soviet constitution, even for a temporary period. Such a step would be tantamount to Lithuania voluntarily rejoining the Soviet Union. It would be worse than the occupation of 1940," he said, referring to the Soviet annexation of Lithuania under the terms of a secret wartime agreement with Nazi Germany.

Such intransigence has clearly infuriated Gorbachev, a master compromiser. It also disturbs some Lithuanians, particularly factory workers who fear that they will be made to bear the costs of the Kremlin's economic boycott. Unflattering comparisons are already being drawn be-



ASSOCIATED PRESS

Vytautas Landsbergis, who has challenged Gorbachev on the issue of independence, likes to find relaxation at the piano in his presidential office.

tween Landsbergis and his Communist predecessor, Algirdas Brazauskas, who favors a more gradual approach to Lithuanian independence.

"Landsbergis does not have any feeling for the problems of ordinary workers. He's also too sharp in his dealings with Moscow. He should have worked out how our economy was going to function and then declared independence. We could have avoided many of the problems that we are going through now if the parliament had picked Brazauskas as president," said Alfonsas Iaskavicius, a worker at the Elfa engine plant in Vilnius.

Such remarks must be offset against solid support for Landsbergis within the Lithuanian independence movement Sajudis, which swept to victory in the republic's elections earlier this year. For many Sajudis supporters, the idea of Lithuanian sovereignty is now embodied by the music professor with the goatee and a Lithuanian flag pin in his lapel. When the president appeared at an open-air concert recently, there were as many chants of "Landsbergis, Landsbergis" as "Lithuania, Lithuania."

The drawing room of Landsbergis's pleasant five-room apartment, large by Soviet standards, is dominated by a portrait of his maternal grandfather, Juonas Jablonskis, a fierce defender of the Lithuanian language. His paternal grandfather, Gabrielus Landsbergis, also was prominent in the struggle against

czarist rule in the late 19th century and was deported for his "seditious" activities.

It was thanks to men like Juonas Jablonskis and Gabrielus Landsbergis that Lithuania was able to regain independence in 1918 following the collapse of both the Russian empire and Germany. Their ideas were passed on to future generations, even as the Baltic states were crushed under the successive steamrollers of Stalinism and Nazism.

"Vytautas was a very serious youth. He did not like idle chatter. He was quiet, industrious, very honest," recalled his father, Vytautas Landsbergis Sr., a prominent architect.

Landsbergis still has vivid memories of the Soviet occupation of Lithuania in June 1940 when he was 8 years old. He remembers his older brother, Gabrielus, whispering, "Look, the Mongols have arrived," as the tanks rolled past. Many of the Soviet soldiers were apparently from Central Asia.

Gabrielus was arrested four years later by the Germans as the youngest member of an underground resistance group. He was taken to Germany at the age of 15 and would almost certainly have been executed had the Western allies not kept bombing the courthouse where the trial was to take place.

The family split up. Vytautas senior followed Gabrielus to Germany, hoping to secure his release. At the end of the war, the father emigrated to Australia. He returned to Lithu-

s an Unlikely Nationalist Firebrand

ania many years later and now lives with Landsbergis, hale at age 98.

"It's a typical Lithuanian story," said Grazyna Landsbergis, whose family was exiled to Siberia in 1949 after being labeled "kulaks," the derisory Russian term for better-off peasants. "Some stayed here. Some were deported to the east. Some managed to make it to the West."

When Mrs. Landsbergis is asked about the difficulties caused by the economic embargo, she automatically thinks of her nine years in Siberia. "Compared to that, you can put up with anything," she said, describing a month-long journey in freezing freight cars across the vast Eurasian plain, a trip she survived on chunks of dry bread. "In Siberia, you learned not to expect any kindness from nature."

The family was eventually allowed to settle along Lake Baikal. Grazyna worked rowing a fishing boat and later found a job on a collective farm. After Joseph Stalin died in 1953, she was allowed to move to the Urals city of Sverdlovsk and enter a music school. She met Landsbergis after moving back to Lithuania in 1957.

Compared to his wife, Landsbergis has led a comfortable life. His interest in Ciurlionis, who played an important part in the renaissance of Lithuanian culture, was a form of intellectual dissent. But the closest he came to opposition activity was when he collected signatures appealing against the closing of the Vilnius University music school in 1975.

"I tried to do what I could, perhaps a little more than was strictly permissible. In those days, the slightest disagreement with the policy of your superiors could have serious consequences. To suggest that a minister was not doing his job properly was much more daring than directly attacking Gorbachev nowadays," he said.

For minor acts of defiance, including his refusal to join the Communist Party, Landsbergis was refused a job in Vilnius. He spent four years commuting to the Baltic seaport of Klaipeda, 150 miles away.

Landsbergis did not take part in the nationalist demonstrations that led to the formation of Sajudis in early 1988. But by the time the movement held its founding congress at the end of the year, he had emerged as one of its principal leaders. Other Sajudis activists looked to him as a good committee man capable of uniting many strands of opinion.

As befits a leading authority on the symbolist movement in music

and painting, Landsbergis sometimes seems as interested in the symbols of Lithuanian independence as the reality. On the eve of the declaration of independence, he and his fellow deputies spent half an hour debating how to sing Lithuania's new national anthem. A few days later, when a reporter asked him how Lithuania would react to the Kremlin's threatened economic embargo, he brushed aside the question as if it were irrelevant.

The present standoff has demonstrated that neither side is fully in control of Lithuanian territory. Lithuania cannot be truly independent without its own energy resources. Soviet power has no legitimacy in Lithuania without the consent of the Lithuanian people. But it is vitally

important for both Vilnius and Moscow to be able to claim a theoretical right to sovereignty."

As he plots his next move in the battle of ideas, Landsbergis depicts himself as carrying out Gorbachev's reform movement. He acknowledges that the drive to Lithuanian independence would not have been possible without the startling political changes that have taken place in the Kremlin over the past five years.

"Fate has turned us into political opponents. But, in reality, we are continuing the work Gorbachev started. It would be much better if we were able to do it with him. The fact he is now braking his own work is a tragedy—but it does not mean that it should be stopped. It's up to us to ensure that it is continued."